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AUTHOR Bullough, Vern; Bullough, Bonnie
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ABSTRACT

Although homosexuality was considered to be a crime in nineteenth-century England, the subculture of the school system promoted it. For example, in the early nineteenth century schoolboys of all ages were locked up in dormitories at 8:00 p.m. and no master entered the building until the next morning. No-one supervised the boys' activities during the night. In the late 1820s reforms were introduced which continued to promote homosexual practices. At this time the prefect system was established, by which older boys were appointed to exercise a moral influence and to control the younger boys' behavior. Under this system "fagging" became popular. Small boys had to carry out tasks for larger boys, and sexual services were frequently included among these tasks. Another frequent practice within the school system, flogging, may have encouraged variant sexual practices. Prefects and teachers were allowed to exercise this corporal punishment which might have encouraged sadistic impulses. A large body of literature, including diaries, indicates that homosexual practices were indeed common within the schools. It is ironic that the English legal and social community publicly denounced homosexuality, because most adult males had participated in or observed these practices when they themselves were in school. Homosexual teachers tended to keep their preferences secret because embarrassment or dismissal could result if they were publicly exposed. (AV)

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NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH HOMOSEXUAL TEACHERS: THE UP FRONT AND BACK STAGE PERFORMANCE

By Vern and Bonnie Bullough

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Technically in England homosexuality came under the general category of a "crime against nature" and was classed in the same general category as mayhem, forcible abduction and rape. Blackstone believed that even though both parties might consent to a sex act "against nature" both should be liable to prosecution. The famed legal commentator was reticent to discuss in detail what he meant by the crime against nature, listing it only as a crime not fit to be named. (1811) Coupled with his reticence were other ambiguities in English common law. Particularly important was the fact that testimony of a person consenting to a homosexual act was not sufficient to convict the partner because such a person was regarded as an accomplice. The meant that even sexual activities involving an adult and a child had to have a third party as a witness for successful prosecution. (Wharton, 1857) This was difficult to obtain since mere solicitation to commit a criminal act was not considered a criminal offense. Thus the nineteenth century English attitude towards homosexuality was marked by great hostility, even horror, but there were few convictions for homosexual activities.

This incongruence contributed to one aspect of the sub-culture of the public school system. Historical data from the period suggests that there were a significant number of homosexual teachers in the public schools and there were several institutionalized practices within the system which can be conceptualized as encouraging

homoerotic behavior among the boys. For example in the early nineteenth century school boys of all ages were locked up in dormitories for the night at 8 p.m. and no master entered the building until the next morning. What happened to the boys while "out of school" was in fact nobody's business. Sidney Smith in 1810 described the English public schools as a "system of premature debauchery that only prevents men from being corrupted by the world by corrupting them before their entry into the world." (Peterson, 1962)

Eventually the British got around to reforming their schools but the reforms did not change the homoerotic nature of the public school. Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby, 1828-42, was the leader in the reforms. One of his major contributions was the establishment of the prefect system. The prefects (sixth form boys) were expected to exercise a moral influence and to control the behavior, not the studies, of the younger boys. Theoretically this was to build up a strong moral influence among the students from the inside rather than from the outside. It was also supposed to give the boys the experience first of being ruled, and then eventually of ruling others, a concept that fitted in with Arnold's concept that boys learn by doing.

Closely allied with the prefect system was the practice of "fagging" which existed in English schools before Arnold but became an important part of his system. Small boys had to carry out tasks for the larger boys including mundane tasks such as cleaning boots and running errands to more unexpected tasks which seem to have included sexual services. The implication in these practices is

obvious because it is from the English public school term "fagging" which originally meant doing something which causes weariness that we derive one of the slang terms for the homosexual.

The homoerotic experiences of boys have been described by several writers who attended public schools in this period. For example, the Editor and essayist, Leigh Hunt in 1850 wrote about his school days as follows:

> But if ever I tasted a disembodied transport on earth, it was in those friendships which I entertained at school, before I dreamt of any maturer feeling. I shall never forget the impression it first made on me. I loved my friend for his gentleness, his candour, his truth, his good repute, his freedom even from my own livelier manner, his calm and reasonable kindness...With other boys I played antics, and rioted in fantastic jests; but in his society, or whenever I thought of him, I fell into a kind of Sabbath state of bliss... I experienced this delightful affection towards three successive schoolfellows, till two of them had for some time gone out into the world and forgotten me...(Hunt, 1850).

Theodore Wratislaw, a minor poet in this poem "To A Sicilian Boy", (1893).

> Love, I adore the contours of thy shape
> Thine exquisite breasts and arms adorable;
> The wonders of thine heavenly throat compel
> Such fire of love as even my dreams escape;
> I love thee as the sea-foam loves the cape,

Or as the shore the sea's enchanting spell:
In sweets the blossoms of thy mouth excel
The tenderest bloom of peach or purple grape. (Wratislaw, 1893)

More recently the novelist Desmond McCarthy described the public school homosexual practices of the early twentieth century in a less favorable way:

> As time went on it became clear to me that this thing, this abomination in our midst, was next to games and, perhaps for a very few, their studies, the most important element in school life. When I say that, I am including its emotional off-shoots, which were of the most varied nature, grading up from prompt animalism through jokes to gay tenderness, even to restless passion and Platonic idealism. Some boys would be made happy for the day by a chance meeting, a few casual words exchanged. Others would discuss chance of seduction with the cynicism and aplomb of a Valmont. Distinction in games, winning colours, might be coveted partly in view of the impression they could be counted upon to make upon "the object."

And finally, the essayist and Christian apoloyist, C.S.Lewis, described the various roles played by his classmates at Wyvern in his autobiography, Surprised by Joy. In the following passage he delineates the roles of the powerful "Bloods" and the "Tarts".

> A Tart is a pretty and effeminate-looking small boy who acts as a catamite to one or more of his seniors, usually Bloods.

The Tarts had an important function to play in making school (what it was advertised to be) a preparation for public life. They were not like slaves, for their favors were (nearly always) solicited, not compelled. Nor were they exactly like prostitutes, for the liaison often had some permanence and, far from being merely sensual, was highly sentimentalized. Nor were they paid (in hard cash, I mean) for their services; though of course they had all the flattery, unofficial influence, favor, and privileges which the mistresses of the great have always enjoyed in adult society. That was where the Preparation for Public Life came in. It would appear from Mr. Arnold Lunn's Harrovians that the Tarts at his school acted as informers. None of ours did. I ought to know, for one of my friends shared a study with a minor Tart; and except that he was sometimes turned out of the study when one of the Tart's lovers came in (and that, after all, was only natural) he had nothing to complain of. I was not shocked by these things. For me, at that age, the chief drawback to the whole system was that it bored me considerably. For you will have missed the atmosphere of our House unless you picture the whole place from week's end to week's end buzzing, tittering, hinting, whispering about this subject. After games, gallantry was the principal topic of polite conversation; who had "a case with" whom, whose star was in the ascendant, who had whose photo, who and when and how often and what night and where.... I suppose it might be called the Greek Tradition. But the vice in question is one to which I had never been tempted, and which, indeed, I still find opaque to the

> imagination. Possibly, if I had only stayed longer at the Coll, I might, in this repect as in others, have been turned into a Normal Boy, as the system promises. As things were, I was bored. (Lewis, 1955)

Another aspect of the English public school system which may have encouraged other variant sex practices was the custom of flogging. Arnold, the reformer, believed in corporal punishment and he expected his prefects to beat the younger boys. Teachers also flogged students. Just how much flogging is associated with sexual feelings, feeding the sadistic impluse in the master and the masochistic impulse in the victim is debatable, but we do know that the richest source of nineteenth century Victorian pornography deals with spanking and punishment, often with boys forced to dress as girls or play the feminine role. Among the underground pornographic works circulating in nineteenth century England were The Order of St. Bridget: Personal Recollections of the Use of the Rod, The Romance of Chastisement: or, The Revelation of Miss Darcy, Sublime of Flagellation, Venus School Mistress, and many others. Closely allied are the epics about bondage such as Miss High Heels and Gynecocracy (Cooper, 1896; Frax, 1962). Many brothels of this period, both homosexual and heterosexual, had spanking rooms.

What existed then was a society in which homosexuality and sado-masochism ~~was~~ were officially denounced, yet unofficially encouraged. This is particularly true after the period of the Arnold reforms. Some evidence of increased homosexual activity during the late nineteenth century is suggested by the vast literature of homosexual

dating from this period. Among those who wrote on homoerotic themes are Alfred Lord Tennyson, Frederick William Faber, William Cory, John Addington Symonds, Algernon Swinburne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Edward Carpenter, Walter Pater, Alfred Douglas, A.E. Housman, Aleister Crowley, Oscar Wilde and many others. (Reade, 1970)

Yet the English reacted in a hostile fashion when confronted with a public accusation of homosexuality. Valuable information about these reactions can be found in Victorian diaries and memoirs, some of which are finally beginning to be published. John Addington Symonds, for example, wrote about many of his homosexual experiences at Harrow. When one of Symonds friends told him he was having a love affair with his headmaster Dr. Charles John Vaughan, Symonds who was himself homosexual, expressed disbelief. The statement was soon confirmed and Symonds watched one night while both boys were reading; Dr. Vaughan gently stroked the thigh of his friend. Though Symonds left Harrow and went on to Oxford, he continued to brood about Dr. Vaughan, and during a walk with one of his professors at Oxford, to whom he was also attracted, he blurted out the story about Dr. Vaughan. The professor was horrified and urged him to tell his father. The guilt ridden Symonds did as directed; he showed his father extracts of his diary and the letter that Dr. Vaughan had written to his friend.

Symond's father acted immediately, corresponding with Vaughan and requesting his resignation. Vaughan and his wife came to see Symonds senior, and Mrs. Vaughan flung herself on her knees confessing that her husband had "this weakness" but begged Symonds to have mercy upon him because it never interfered with his useful service to the school. Vaughan was however forced to retire. The affair

did not end there since his retirement caused some gossip. Symonds senior was adamant that Vaughan never be allowed to hold a responsible position again and when shortly after this Vaughan was offered a Bishopric of Rochester, the elder Symonds threatened to expose him unless he withdrew. Vaughan complied and all was kept quiet, and the system at Harrow was left unchanged. (Grosskurth, 1964)

Symonds diary also identified two other homsexual teachers who were dismissed. William Johnston, who became assistant master at Eton in 1845, left the school and resigned his fellowship at King's College, Cambridge in 1872. Apparently a parent of one of the boys with whom he had been involved had complained to the headmaster (Grosskurth, 1964, p. 48). It seems that the incident caused Johnson great embarassment because he changed his name to William Johnson Cory. It is interesting to note that the Dictionary of National Biography says that he left Eton because he had inherited some property which involved changing his name. Perhaps both factors were involved. At any rate Johnson-Cory returned to his native Devonshire, where he married the local vicar's daughter, fathered a son, and was employed teaching classics to young women. He died in 1892. (R.G., 1917)

The second, Oscar Browning, one of Johnson's pupils, also went to King's College and returned to Eton. He was an extremely popular teacher although he upset the headmaster by his outspoken views on educational reform. He even went so far as to advocate giving advice on sexual matters to the boys. In 1875 the headmaster dismissed him and although the matter was widely discussed, homosexuality was never publicly mentioned. Browning returned to Cambridge where he lived on his King's College fellowship and did historical research.

In 1885 the penalty for being identified as homosexual became formalized. During the debate on the white slavery act an amendment was suggested which included homosexual activity. (Bullough, V., 570-572) The most publicized victim of the new act was not a child procurer, for whom it was theoretically designed, but the writer Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). When the Marquess of Queensberry accused Wilde of enticing his son, Alfred Douglas, into homosexuality, Wilde sued him for criminal libel. On the strength of the evidence presented in the first trial, Wilde himself was arrested and ultimately convicted. (Hyde, 1956) It has often been hypothesized that the main reason the government prosecuted Wilde so vigorously was that the Liberal party, then in power, was fearful that it would be tarred with the brush of homosexuality. Though at this date it is impossible to determine how many members of the Liberal party were homosexual or had homoerotic contacts, two prominent young Liberals were later involved in publicized homosexual affairs, Lewis Harcourt, later Viscount Harcourt, and William Earl Beauchamp.

One of the few public figures who had anything to say on Wilde's behalf was W.T. Stead, one of those responsible for the passage of the anti White Slave Act. Stead was a dissenter, and therefore not eligible to attend the public schools, complained that Wilde was unfairly singled out, because if all persons guilty of Oscar Wilde's offences were to be clapped into goal, there would be a very surprising exodus from Eton and Harrow, Rugby and Winchester. (Bullough, V., p. 574) A similar feeling was expressed by a friend of Wilde, Christopher Sclater Millard who protested against the discrimination shown to Wilde since the crown, if it were consistent, should prosecute "every boy at a public or private school or half the men in the Universities... In the later places "poederism" is as common as

fornication and everybody knows it...(Reynolds Newspaper, 1895; Hyde, 1970).

In sum the English public school was known by much of the leadership in England to have been a haven for adolescent homosexual practices, many of which continued beyond adolescence. Most of the men who dominated public affairs had attended such schools themselves and had either participated in or observed homosexual practices. Yet at a later date many of them either denied to themselves or to others that these boyish behaviors were in fact homoerotic. Consequently if a master became indiscrete enough to be caught writing a mash note, or his homosexuality became too obvious to outsiders, the alumni of the system acted shocked and joined in meting out punishment, or at least they kept quiet when others did so. In effect they denied that homoerotic behavior was a part of the norms of the public school system. What men knew about themselves was not to be revealed to others.

These Victorian practices seem like an interesting example of concepts developed by Erving Goffman. (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967, 1974) The front stage performance was characterized by a denial of the existence of any homosexual teachers or homoerotic practices, among the boys at the public schools, while the back stage performance was supportive of such practices as fagging, flogging, and intimate love affairs between adolescents or between male teachers and students. This discrepant picture of the same reality allowed the homosexual teacher to live and work without any significant stigma or punishment unless and until there was a public accusation against him. Then an outraged public, including graduates of the public schools who were

aware of the homoerotic back stage performance turned against the hapless victim with vengeance. Homosexuality could also be used as a convient charge for dismissal, when the headmaster wanted to remove someone. Public outrage seems to have been stimulated more by a threat of embarassment than any real grievance against the accused. With this double standard of performance it is easy to see why late nineteenth century gay teachers tried to keep their sexual preference secret. Vestiges of these Victorian norms still haunt us, serving as barriers to any easy exit from the closet even now. (Humphreys, 1972)

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